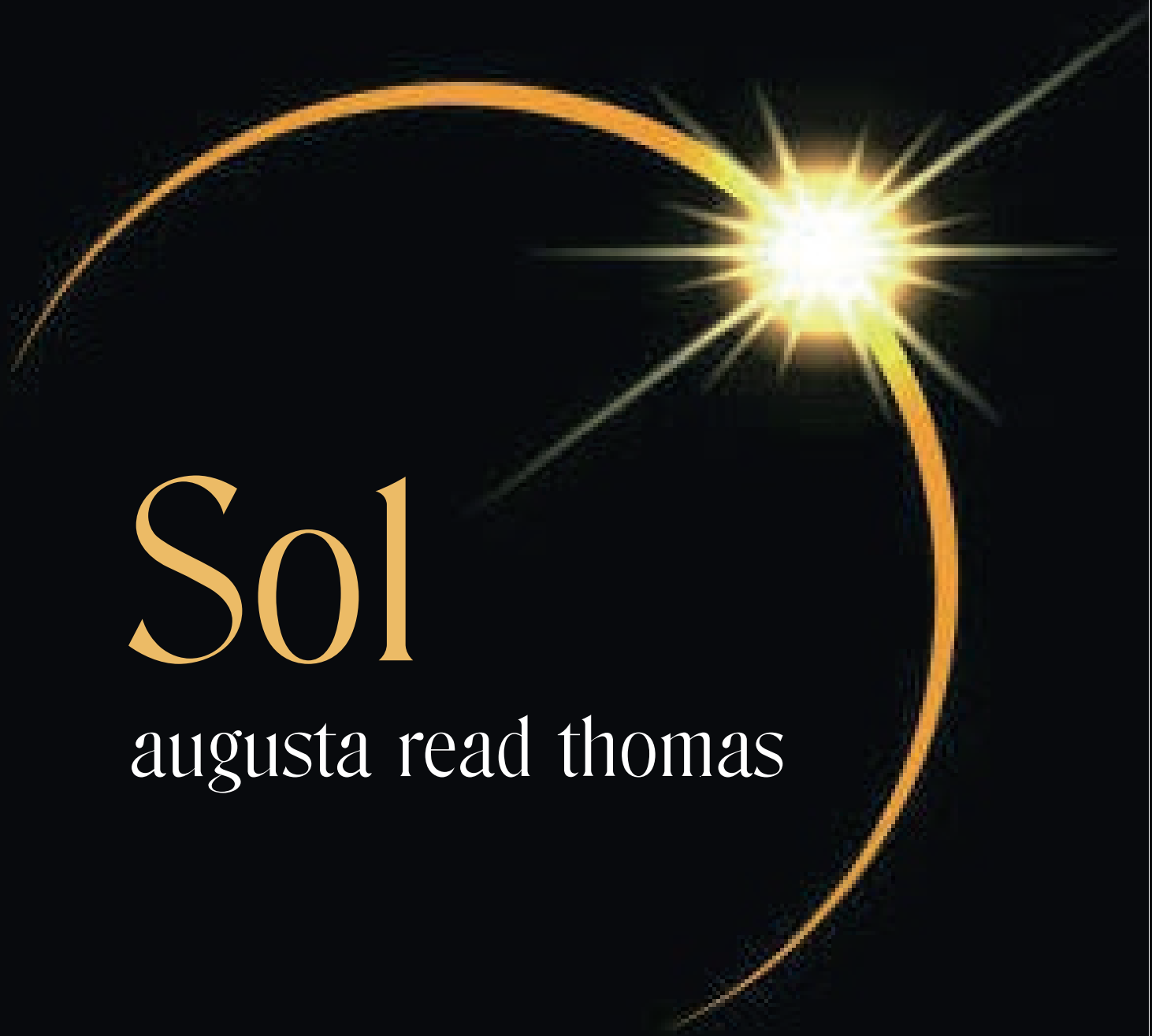

Sol

augusta read thomas

Sol **Augusta Read Thomas**

World Premiere Recordings

	SOLSTICE RITUAL (2024)	18:32
	Homage to Varèse and Ravel for 14 virtuosi	
1	I. Reaching Skyward	06:09
2	II. Two Drumming Rituals	06:10
3	III. Bell Prayers	06:13

Members of the Grossman Ensemble and Guests
Jeffrey Milarsky *conductor*

Constance Volk *flute*
Andy Nogal *oboe*
Katie Jimoh *clarinet*
Ben Melsky *harp*
Daniel Pesca *piano*
Winston Choi *celesta*
Greg Beyer *percussion 1*
John Corkill *percussion 2*
Adam Rosenblatt *percussion 3*
Kyle Flens *percussion 4*
MingHuan Xu *violin 1*
Theo Ramsey *violin 2*
Doyle Armbrust *viola*
Nick Photinos *cello*

	MAGICAL FLIGHTS OF THE ADARNA BIRD (2025)	**07:40**
4	I. Invocation – Majestic; Blazing; Illuminated	01:11
5	II. Spiritus – Lyrical; Rhapsodic; Animated and Sparkling	03:04
6	III. Spiraling Healing Poem – Elegant; Dreamy	03:25

Alexander Hersh *cello*

	ILLUMINATIONS "FANFARE SINFONIA" (2023)	**10:50**
	For solo timpani, 3 percussion and 9 brass	
7	I. Ceremonious – Stately	05:39
8	II. Lyrical – Elegant	05:11

Josh Jones *timpani*

DePaul Wind Ensemble

Erica Neidlinger *conductor*

Hyonsu Jeoung *horn 1*
Jonathan Thomas *horn 2*
Hamed Barbarji *trumpet 1*
Kai-Chun Chang *trumpet 2*
Maria Merlo *trumpet 3*
Josh Camper *trumpet 4*
Erich Corfman *trombone 1*
Rix Barlow *trombone 2*
Cameron Randall *bass trombone*
Sehee Park *percussion 1*
Nikko Gonzalez percussion 2
Kevin Yetter *percussion 3*

9	LIGHT PEARLS THROUGH PRISMS (2025)	05:50
	Marianne Parker *piano*	
	EQUINOX RITUAL (2025)	20:09
	Homage to Igor Stravinsky for Percussion Quartet	
10	I. Reaching Skyward	04:34
11	II. Three Drumming Rituals	11:43
12	III. Bell Prayers	03:52
	Garrett Arney *percussion 1*	
	John Corkill *percussion 2*	
	Adam Rosenblatt *percussion 3*	
	Nonoka Mizukami *percussion 4*	

Total playing time 63:08

THANKS TO

The whole Nimbus team. All the musicians who made these recordings.
Phil Pierick, Grossman Ensemble Manager

CREDITS

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Christopher L. Willis who was the recording, editing, and mastering engineer on all the compositions
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INVOKING LUMINOSITY

a reflection on 'Sol'

In this cultural moment of bewildering chaos and upheaval, do you find yourself grasping for rituals to keep your head above water, as I do? When the alarm chirps each morning, I half expect to hear the baritone intoning of "Koyaanisqatsi" wafting in through my bedroom window, reaffirming yet another day of a "life out of balance." In response, I employ little ceremonies almost like defensive amulets: box breathing, a trip down to the Art Institute to admire the Albrights, doomscrolling, attempting the perfect pot of pu-erh, or, in the interest of radical transparency, the selection of the perfect t-shirt that will (hopefully/inexplicably) imbue me with necessary armor against the inevitable shock parade that awaits.

Each of these involves varying levels of superstition—not to mention efficacy—but what I've come to understand is that the magick most suited to center and rebalance me in this era is that of organized sound. To your great benefit, the album about to swirl amidst your cranium like incense from a censer is a liturgy most potent, and one poised to restore for you some measure of coherence. Perhaps even something resembling balance.

For some twenty-five years I've had the inestimable privilege of collaborating with Augusta Read Thomas and so it is with some authority that I claim she is a singular refutation of Newtonian physics: she creates energy. In countless workshops, recording sessions, performances, and masterclasses I've watched her elicit previously undiscovered timbral nuance, dynamic possibility, and personal virtuosity from players and composers alike. Hers is a creative energy so irrepressible that somewhere amidst the cascade of commissions, awards, and international flights to attend performances of her work she, to mention just two examples, launched Chicago's largest-scale new music festival (Ear Taxi) as well as one of the country's most prolific incubators of new work, The Grossman Ensemble. I'm happy to report that the performances captured within this tracklist provide significant evidence in substantiating this bold claim.

More pertinent to our experience here, though, is the energy conjured in, and by, her music. Gusty's color palette comprises hues jealously guarded by the paragons of Western classical music—names like Ravel and Stravinsky—not to mention those all her own. There are two aspects of this prismatic ability I find most astounding: that she creates them without electronics or even advanced extended techniques, and that each color seems to contain its own light source. That might all sound a bit hyperbolic, but a cursory perusal of her scores reveals an expansive and exacting panoply of directives providing color and direction to nearly every gesture. A cascade of descriptors like "luminous," "optimistic," "resplendent," "rising skyward," and "like a passionate memory" envelop and inspire the performers so dependably that, on the occasion of commissioning her to write for my own Spektral Quartet, we created no less than a full set of refrigerator magnet poetry exclusively featuring these lexical gems lifted from her scores.

To my ears, *Sol* offers Gusty's compositional luminosity as a collection of rituals for introspection, spiritual stimulus, and at the very least, a reminder that light can prevail in darkness. Particularly enticing is that when imbibed as a whole, this record shepherds us through an extra-ordinary ceremony that, as with each of the five rites comprising it, tenders the possibility for subtle yet substantive restoration and ultimately, transformation.

THE RITUAL DANCE

The longest and shortest days of the year are points not simply marked with the calendar, but rather polarities felt throughout the body, whether in delight at the full extension of a summer's day or in shivering anticipation of a promised, coming thaw. What is remarkable about ***Solstice Ritual*** for 14 virtuosi is not that it is inspired by dance, but that one can virtually see bodies in motion while listening to it. And in this particular ballet—in concert version or as the score beckons: "To be performed with dancers when feasible"—each instrument flutters across the stage as a top-of-the-marquee lead before vanishing in a breathless blur.

That expansive color palette I mentioned earlier? Look no further than the heraldic, two-note figure and subsequent ensemble chords that exuberantly catapult this piece into being. These ensemble moments are often grounded in the winds and strings but recontextualized

between vibraphone, crotales, glockenspiel, celesta, and piano, vitalizing and revitalizing them with what approaches the ears like a catalogue of celestial resonances. As these glimmering lights dissolve, soloists continually emerge and spur each other on in what I consider the piece's most salient feature: the illusion of extemporaneous expression. *Solstice Ritual* often sounds like a kinetic improvisation erupting from within a circle of dancers, and if you listen closely, you'll occasionally glimpse instruments un-selfconsciously stretching to the outer limits of human playability. Performing it may be only for the daring, but the experience of listening is something altogether effervescent and uplifting.

A HEALING INCANTATION

One characteristic of any Augusta Read Thomas score (I have yet to find an exception) is the space it creates for listeners to have their own personal encounter, irrespective of the piece's title or the materials providing inspiration to its author. *Magical Flights of the Adarna Bird* may be a direct reference to the folkloric avian of Filipino legend, but Constantin Brâncuşi's "L'Oiseau dans l'espace" ("Bird in Space") is the image instantly projected on the back of my eyelids when I hear it. Like the skyward-oriented brass sculpture, the cello writing here is simultaneously elegant and dangerous, as though nearing the point of bursting, and in the eminently dextrous hands of soloist Alexander Hersh, even silence is a restless, gripping affair. The legend of the Ibong Adarna holds that its song transfers powerful healing properties and here both the composer and the performer wield the overtones and long resonances of the instrument like a restorative touch. Consider, if you will, your proximity to the cello on this recording and notice every sound haloing the bowed pitches.

We may beseech the elusive Adarna to make us whole, but it is clear that this healing resembles no decadent, spa-like escapade. Hersh's core timbre and vibrato is at key moments of the deep tissue variety, and Gusty's building of momentum through bursts of repeated pitches simply won't allow for a passive experience. As the cello eventually resumes its lofty perch, it sings now with clarion harmonics, its fiery feathers shed with the effort…but its once-pallid patient reanimated and renewed.

AN INVOCATION OF GRATITUDE

It is standard practice for a composer to thank the musicians learning and performing their work. It is a rarity for a musician to arrive at a dress rehearsal only to discover a full-color print of the composer's rendering of their piece's form, personalized with specific references to their unique contributions. Gratitude exists in the DNA of an Augusta Read Thomas score quite literally as well since any new project will inevitably include targeted questions to individual players and genuine requests for feedback that will directly impact the final draft. This collaborative approach not only empowers players and expedites good decision-making, it encourages a sense of ownership across an ensemble.

This is the aforementioned creation-of-energy-where-none-previously-existed and nowhere is this more evident than in *Sol's* sole performance by pre-professionals. The first two notes of *Illuminations "Fanfare Sinfonia"* are a not-so-hidden "Thank you," and with each recitation of thanks that follows, The DePaul University Wind Ensemble seems to retort in appreciation by way of unswerving performances—in particular some unassailably deft solo timpani by Josh Jones—of some of the album's longest-range phrases and melodic arcs.

BEHOLDING THE CRYSTAL

Our rituals thus far require the participation of other acolytes and/or public displays of one kind or another. With *Light Pearls Through Prisms*, though, the ceremony in question is a private, deeply intimate endeavor. Pianist Marianne Parker's plaintive unfurling of this pithy miniature reveals dissonances we haven't yet encountered on this album. Diminutive pitch collections refuse to make anchor in a tonal center, creating instead more avenues begging for exploration with every attempt at resolution.

The experience is one akin to slowly rotating a faceted crystal in one's fingers in a sunlit room, surrounded by an abundance of mirrors. Innumerable points of fascination flirtatiously appear and then escape with every blink of the eye. Contemplating this solitary object from any new angle changes it, but also changes the ways it ornaments its surroundings. Take note, if you would, of the way Parker convincingly asserts the tangible nature of this sonic crystal

before, without warning, she proves that its very existence is hinged on our point of view. Perhaps the ritual here is one of letting go of control, or any belief that it exists.

RITUAL IMPLIES RETURN

As a listener who prefers vinyl to streaming—purely because the act of lowering a tonearm or flipping to Side B coaxes me into a more active listening experience—I adore a release that rewards a top-to-tail listen, and *Sol* is just such an album. If the magick of the previous four rituals is most often noticed in the afterglow of a bowed string or a malleted bell, and in particular the alchemical combination of these composite sounds, ***Equinox Ritual*** acts as a kind of fully-realized resonance of *Solstice Ritual* and by extension, the culmination of the album's entire transformative arc. Our perspective is once again altered, this time by the distilling of fourteen voices down to a concise band of four percussionists. Not only does the album closer share the heraldic two-note gesture and virtuosic ascending triplet lines with the album opener, both are emblazoned with "Majestic, luminous, optimistic; always resonant" above the first measure. The vista here is gauzy, like *Solstice Ritual* behind a veil…until it isn't. Vignettes of ritual drumming and imagined choreography are more surprising in this context and even the most understated solos, as with the tambourine around the 15:00 mark, become unexpected inflection points in their own right.

The vestments, the incantations, the movements…so much is familiar here, but it is decidedly not the same. These rituals have changed us, so subtly that we don't notice until we return to them a year hence. Once again we chant so that our spirits might once again become majestic, luminous, optimistic, and always resonant.

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Jeffrey Milarsky

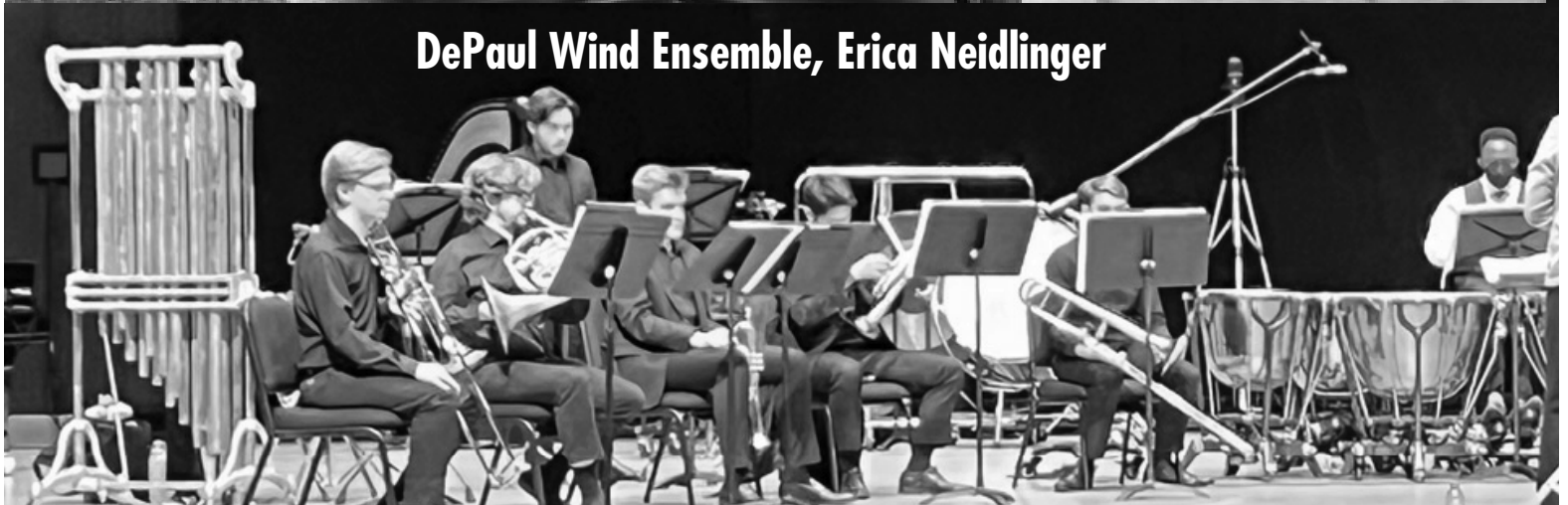
MingHuan Xu

Nick Photinas

Alexander Hersh

The Grossman Ensemble and Guests

Josh Jones



DePaul Wind Ensemble, Erica Neidlinger

Marianne Parker

Adam Rosenblatt

John Corkill & Garrett Arney

Nonoka Mizukami

For more information about the performers please visit

Solstice Ritual

Members of The Grossman Ensemble and Guests

Constance Volk *flute*	Andy Nogal *oboe*	Katie Jimoh *clarinet*
Ben Melsky *harp*	Daniel Pesca *piano*	Theo Ramsey *violin 2*
Doyle Armbrust *viola*	Nick Photinos *cello*	Greg Beyer *percussion 1*
John Corkill *percussion 2*		

cccc.uchicago.edu/grossman-ensemble/about

Winston Choi *celesta*	*roosevelt.edu/profile/wchoi*
Adam Rosenblatt *percussion 3*	*rosenblatt.live*
Kyle Flens *percussion 4*	*kyleflens.com*
MingHuan Xu *violin 1*	*minghuanviolin.com*
Jeffrey Milarsky *conductor*	*jeffreymilarsky.com*

Magical Flights of the Adarna Bird

Alexander Hersh *cello* *alexanderhersh.com*

Illuminations "Fanfare Sinfonia"

Josh Jones *timpani* *drummojo.com*

DePaul Wind Ensemble, Erica Neidlinger *conductor*

Hyunsu Jeoung *horn 1*	Jonathan Thomas *horn 2*	Hamed Barbarji *trumpet 1*
Kai-Chun Chang *trumpet 2*	Maria Merlo *trumpet 3*	Josh Camper *trumpet 4*
Erich Corfman *trombone 1*	Rix Barlow *trombone 2*	
Cameron Randall *bass trombone*		
Sehee Park *percussion 1*	Nikko Gonzalez *percussion 2*	Kevin Yetter *percussion 3*

music.depaul.edu/concerts-events/school-of-music-ensembles/Pages/default.aspx

Light Pearls Through Prisma

Marianne Parker *piano* *marianneparker.com*

Equinox Ritual

Garrett Arney	music.ku.edu/people/garret-arney
John Corkill	*cccc.uchicago.edu/grossman-ensemble/about*
Adam Rosenblatt	rosenblatt.live
Nonoka Mizukami	peabody.jhu.edu/preparatory/faculty

AUGUSTA READ THOMAS

Thomas' music is nuanced, majestic, elegant, capricious, & colorful—*"it is boldly considered music that celebrates the sound of instruments and reaffirms the vitality of orchestral music."* (*Philadelphia Inquirer*) Her music was featured on a Grammy-winning CD, her impressive catalogue of works embodies unbridled passion and fierce poetry. *The New Yorker* called her *"a true virtuoso composer."* Critic Edward Reichel wrote, *"Thomas has secured for herself a permanent place in the pantheon of American composers of the 20th and 21st centuries. She is without question one of the best and most important composers that this country has today. Her music has substance, depth, and a sense of purpose. She has a lot to say and knows how to say it—and in a way that is intelligent yet appealing and sophisticated."*

Thomas is one of the most active composers in the world, with commissions, performances, recordings, awards, and honors, but she is also a long-standing, exemplary citizen of the profession at large with an extensive and deeply committed history as a generous colleague in the profession.

www.augustareadthomas.com